

Netanyahu's party wins most seats in Israeli election, still far short of governing majority

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Israelis voted Tuesday in a very tight election that could determine Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's future and finally break a debilitating political stalemate — or send the country back to yet another round of voting.

Here are some significant developments:

- Polling stations have closed, and exit polls show Netanyahu's Likud party winning the most parliamentary seats but falling well short of a majority.
- Netanyahu could be within reach of a majority coalition if he can persuade former defense minister Naftali Bennett to add his party's seats to those won by parties already allied with the prime minister, according to some exit polls.
- Exit polls showed the Religious Zionist Party, which includes far-right and homophobic elements that have roots in the overtly racist Kahanist party, receiving enough votes to enter parliament.
- Israel's Election Committee said 67.2 percent of the eligible electorate turned out to vote, a decline of 4.3 percent from the last election.
- This election, as well as the previous three, was largely seen as a referendum on the tenure of Netanyahu, who continues to loom large over a divided nation, even as he stands trial on corruption charges.

JERUSALEM — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's party won the most parliamentary seats in Israel's election Tuesday, according to exit polls, putting him within sight of securing a governing coalition and extending his tenure as the country's longest-serving leader.

Netanyahu's Likud party far outpolled its main challengers but still fell well short of a parliamentary majority, and the exit poll results, which continued to shift in the wee hours of Wednesday, suggested that a majority might remain out of reach.

The exit poll results show that Israeli politics remain stalemated by a profound divide. Three previous elections in

If Netanyahu again beats back a furious political challenge, he will still face an ongoing legal challenge in the courts, where he is being tried on charges of bribery, fraud and corruption.

Netanyahu's alliance garnered 53 seats, according to an average of early television exit polls, while a disparate collection of anti-Netanyahu parties won 57. If Netanyahu's alliance of right-wing and religious parties is to retain power, that could depend on whether he can persuade one of his former coalition partners, former defense minister Naftali Bennett, to join him. Bennett, a right-wing leader who broke with the prime minister to form his own party, might be able to give Netanyahu the margin he needs to secure a bare majority in the Knesset.

Bennett has not ruled out serving in a new Netanyahu government, even though the two former allies are said to dislike each other. And Bennett's Knesset seats, perhaps as many as eight, would give him significant power in the coalition negotiations that will begin immediately. Some commentators immediately dubbed him "the kingmaker."

"It is unlikely that Bennett will go with the alternative coalition" and make common cause with the anti-Netanyahu parties, said Israeli political scientist Emmanuel Navon. "It would make little sense for Bennett to do it for his political future."

Addressing a jubilant crowd at his Yamina party headquarters outside Tel Aviv, Bennett gave no clue to his intentions but called for unity.

"The power you've given me, I'll use it for one, and only one purpose," he said. "What is best for Israel. What is best for all Israelis."

If Bennett delivers the seats Netanyahu needs, Israel's government would move even further to the right. Exit polls also showed that the Religious Zionist Party, which includes far-right elements with roots in an overtly racist anti-Arab party, would win seats in parliament, providing crucial support for the prime minister.

Political analysts cautioned that exit polls have been wrong before and that final results may not be released for several days.

But at the Jerusalem headquarters of Netanyahu's Likud party, supporters bounced up and down and waved banners at projections showing the prime minister might be able to extend his record 14 years in Israel's top job.

When Netanyahu finally addressed his supporters after 2 a.m., he said he had spoken with Bennett and told him, "Let's do the responsible thing and together form a stable government - a right wing government that will care for all citizens of Israel." The prime minister called for an end to Israel's political deadlock, saying, "We cannot in any way drag the country to a fifth election. We must form a stable government now."

The mood was far more subdued at the camp of opposition leader Yair Lapid as exit polls showed that he and his potential partners may have fallen short of ousting Netanyahu.

This is the fourth time Israelis have voted in national elections in 23 months, a time of unprecedented political paralysis as the country has been buffeted by the coronavirus pandemic.

"It's frustrating," said Avraham, a 59-year-old lawyer after voting Tuesday at a Jerusalem school. He agreed to

Israelis were skeptical that the vote would end the stalemate, as previous bargaining has failed to produce working coalitions except for a short-lived — and dysfunctional — emergency “unity” government that was formed last spring as the pandemic erupted.

“It is unclear if four rounds of election have resolved the longest political crisis in Israel’s history, with the country remaining as divided as it has been over the past two years, and fifth elections remain a very real option,” said Yohanan Plesner, the president of the Israel Democracy Institute.

The ongoing health crisis and a steep economic downturn formed a backdrop to Tuesday’s vote, the second conducted in pandemic conditions. Election workers in hazmat suits collected ballots in hospital wards, and buses were parked outside some polling places to serve as remote ballot drops for coronavirus-positive or quarantined voters.

The unease may have benefited Netanyahu, who has been both blamed for the ravages of the virus and hailed for orchestrating one of the world’s fastest vaccination campaigns.

“I’m not really surprised by these results,” said Yonatan Freeman, a political science professor at Hebrew University. “When you look at times of emergency, times of challenge, that’s something that benefits the incumbent.”

Netanyahu seems to have turned back a challenge from his right flank. Former Likud education minister Gideon Saar left the party to take on his former mentor. His bid initially attracted significant interest as an option for conservatives looking to elect a right-wing leader without the prime minister’s ethics taint. “Likud without Netanyahu,” said Jonathan Rynhold, a professor of politics at Bar-Ilan University.

In the end, Saar finished with only six to eight seats, according to the exit polls, as significant numbers of Likud voters stayed with Netanyahu. Even some non-Likud voters supported the party in the hopes of finally bringing the elections loop to a decisive end.

“At this point, I’m voting strategically and not 100 percent on my ideology,” said Efrat Lev, a CrossFit coach and competitive powerlifter who was casting an afternoon vote in Efrat, a Jewish settlement near Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank. Even though she said her first choice was the right-wing Religious Zionist Party and has qualms about Netanyahu’s ethics, she voted for Likud in hopes of giving him a decisive majority once and for all.

“At this point, I’m not looking to vote for an angel,” Lev said.

The challenge led Netanyahu to seek new pockets of support. He surprised many in the political establishment by inviting Itamar Ben Gvir, an extremist politician with roots in the banned Kahanist movement, to join his coalition.

Gvir’s partnership with another right-wing party in Netanyahu’s coalition was projected to win seven seats. If this result is confirmed, he would be the first Kahanist politician in the Knesset since the movement’s Kach Party was banned as a terrorist group in 1994 after one of its leaders massacred Palestinian worshipers in a West Bank mosque.

At the other end of the spectrum, Netanyahu sought votes in Israel’s Arab communities. In a turnaround from past campaigns in which he portrayed Israeli Arabs and their politicians as a threat, he sought out members of Israel’s Arab community and promised to boost spending on police and infrastructure in some of the country’s poorest towns.

The outreach to Arabs helped splinter the Joint List, the coalition of Arab parties that had achieved record support

stayed home. “The campaign that happened throughout the Arab society was very difficult,” he said. “All the extremism of the campaign has only increased the feeling of apathy.”

Liberal and centrist voters found little to cheer in the exit polls, although the Labor Party, long in decline, made a stronger showing than expected under its leader, former news anchor Merav Michaeli.

And Benny Gantz, the former army chief of staff who infuriated supporters when he joined Netanyahu’s emergency unity government last year, defied predictions of his political collapse and appeared to secure more seats than expected for his Blue and White party.

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